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The Depth of Shallow Culture: The High Art of Shoes, Movies, Novels, Monsters, and Toys

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Depth of Shallow Culture: The High Art of Shoes, Movies, Novels, Monsters, and Toys* by Albert J. Bergesen

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used in the work of private eyes. What an incredible source of knowledge about the “faking it” skills and techniques used to gainfully trick others to tell or exhibit the truth about their thoughts and conduct! The chapters provide great support to Goffman’s theory, and Shulman incorporates his ideas (e.g., seduction, calculated unintentionality) in telling about this profession. Under witty titles such as “Building Believable Lies” (ch. 2), “The Shadow World of Unofficial Deception” (ch. 4), “The Everyday Ethics of Workplace Lies” (ch. 8), and “Goofing Off and Getting Along” (ch. 7), we begin to understand how both formal and informal deceptions work and how organizational cultures facilitate them through “Subterranean Education and Training” (ch. 5). Chapter 9 provides a fair summary of the theory of workplace deception. Undoubtedly it is as pervasive and normal in organizations as having lunch breaks. The bottom line is that organizational members deceive themselves and others in order to survive in the organization: “Deception is a basic aspect of work” (p. 166). This final chapter also proposes constructive theoretical connections with other related fields of theory and research as emotional labor, business ethics, and organizational misconduct.

Well, reader, while this is a good book, an important scholarly book, an insightful and well-written piece, it certainly is not marvelous. I exaggerated my opening statement to get your attention. I used a little deception. Even scholars lie to promote their arguments and increase readership. Publishers and editors use deception to be competitive on the bookshelf. To me, there was no need for the main huge-fonted title *From Hire to Liar*. It is catchy but misleading. Yes, employees lie but they are not liars. The proper book title could say: *Deception in the Workplace*. And there was no need for the tacky cover design of a Pinocchio style happy-go-lucky face; a plain dark-green or brown would suffice. And you, dear reader (as poet Billy Collins calls you), you are not *really* dear, you are just somebody we both happen to be riding “around this whip of a road we can’t help traveling together,” and this is good enough!

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## IDEOLOGY AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION

*The Depth of Shallow Culture: The High Art of Shoes, Movies, Novels, Monsters, and Toys*, by **Albert J. Bergesen**. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2007. 133pp. \$24.95 paper. ISBN: 9781594512742.

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The goal of Albert Bergesen’s engaging book is to bring the cultural object back into sociological analysis. Drawing upon five forms of popular culture—shoes, movies, novels, monsters, and toys—*The Depth of Shallow Culture* makes a compelling case that although sociology long ago forfeited contributing to scholarly understanding of attributes of art forms, it possesses a recoverable foundation for advancing this agenda as a disciplinary goal. By relying upon popular culture for case illustrations, Bergesen demonstrates that a theoretical synthesis between art, society, and culture is possible even for cultural forms produced in explicitly commercial contexts where aesthetic considerations are often presumed to be absent altogether. The aesthetics of popular culture, he argues, is anything but shallow and is as informed by sophisticated

stylistic form and philosophical depth of thematic content as is the aesthetics of elite cultural forms.

The book relies upon three foundational theoretical perspectives that vary in cause or explanation for analysis of cultural objects: the exogenous models of Marx and Durkheim that account for a reflection theory of culture in which society's power or economic configuration shapes the culture it produces; the contrasting endogenous model of Weber that grants culture an analytically autonomous realm and foregrounds the logic and practices of business production; and, the model of full endogeneity, or complete autonomy, as was observed in Lieberman's study of child-naming practices, in which a self-contained internal cultural logic prevails. But as Bergesen's analysis makes clear, things are not that neatly theoretically bounded, and each chapter of the book draws upon elements from all three in ways that will jostle sociologists out of their comfort zones of reliable explanation.

The chapter on the Baroque Sneaker argues that the sneaker's life cycle of stylistic elements parallels evolution in the fine arts and that the design of this shoe, too, is rooted in historically shifting concentrations of civic status and power. Understanding the sneaker's evolution to its current styling requires analysis of its functional origins as a compositionally balanced Archaic form ordained by raw materials and early athletic uses, its rise in status and social power and subsequent reliance upon Classic elements of style, its later transformations that were made possible by synthetic materials and expanding social uses, and its social decline and devolution into unbalanced contemporary Baroque designs. Bergesen finds that the interrelationship between the principles of style and concentrations of world culture and power—whether that power resides in Athens or in commerce—is not spurious. The chapter on Rambo and Don Quixote—both of whom are as fictional characters compulsively entangled by a time-bound national outlook, creed, ethic, or code of honor—explores how fiction functions as a cultural metaphor that can capture national accounts of the dynamics of world-system position. To analyze monsters, such as the iconic King Kong and Godzilla, calls for insight into the cultural algorithms that produce monsters' compositional forms—Western mixes of already existing natural

creatures or Eastern mythical beings of the hypothetical and extra-natural realm. These differences, Bergesen argues, are lodged in the ways in which a nation's political systems share or mix power with its constituents. Commonalities produced by globalization, such as the spread of various forms of democratic political systems, complicate these classifications. Toy design embodies philosophical or religious differences in Eastern and Western beliefs about the nature of reality itself. Western logics entail cultural category systems with permeable walls, so aesthetic elements mix more freely in toys. Eastern beliefs, with less porous cultural categories, yield mythological beings that emphasize essential differences. These cultural differences extend to how toys are designed for user manipulation into varying physical shapes, which, in turn, prescribes the conduct of creative play. Eastern toys require morphing or jumping over non-permeable cosmological membranes embodied in their design, similar to the requirements of belief systems that feature reincarnation as a central mechanism, whereas toy designs of the West draw upon assumptions about the malleability of reality.

The final chapter makes a compelling argument about the importance of a cultural object's aesthetic elements to the meaning it emits. Tracing the origins of sociology's investment in separating knowledge of art's stylistic form from knowledge of its meaning, Bergesen explains why the sociology and philosophy of art stopped engaging the medium itself. He then argues insightfully for an understanding of style structure so that an art syntax may be devised for examining "the larger sets of meanings in objects" and how rules and principles "govern the arrangement of constituent popular culture/art materials" (pp. 114–115). He concludes that the power of art lies in its form, not in the secondary act of interpretative framing that currently prevails in the sociology of culture.

Bergesen's synthesis is subtle and complex in its integration of abstract sociological theory, art history, and art, and is incisive in its understanding of cultural objects in different historical, political, and cultural contexts. This tidy book has considerable depth, so don't let its clarity deceive you. Students and colleagues alike will appreciate how it skillfully conjoins abstract theory with concrete analy-

sis as a guide for future ventures into this overdue disciplinary agenda.

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*Tabloid Justice: Criminal Justice in an Age of Media Frenzy, 2nd Edition*, by **Richard L. Fox, Robert W. Van Sickle, and Thomas L. Steiger**. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007. 251pp. \$23.50 paper. ISBN: 9781588265326.

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Although there is a large body of research examining the intersection of media coverage and the criminal justice system, there are few empirical studies that specifically examine how high profile cases are presented in the media and how they impact public understanding of the legal system. It is unfortunate, although there are a few notable exceptions, that scholars have not deeply considered the impact of perhaps the rarest of news stories: the celebrated case. In the second edition of their book, *Tabloid Justice: Criminal Justice in the Age of Media Frenzy*, Richard Fox, Robert Van Sickle, and Thomas Steiger provide an important contribution that helps to fill this gap in the research.

This book provides an analysis of the significance and meaning of high-profile “media trials” in contemporary society. Specifically, they discuss why there has been a rising number of high profile cases, how these cases are presented in the press, and the significance of their coverage. The book has three parts: an introductory chapter and two methodological appendices. Part 1 focuses on how ten high-profile cases were presented in the media, as well as how changes in the business of news-making and changes to the media environment impacted the intensity and type of coverage of these cases. Part 2 focuses on the impact of these cases on public understanding of the criminal justice system, providing the results from two national surveys. Part 3 provides an overview of the findings and some concluding remarks.

As the title demonstrates, they refer generally to this coverage as tabloid justice, but do not be misled by their use of the term. They are not referring to a specific publication or historic era, but to a style of coverage (p. 2).

In fact, what is intriguing about their argument is their conclusion that the lurid style of reporting that characterizes tabloid publications has crossed over into mainstream news coverage.

The authors acknowledge other potential significant cases, but focus on celebrated cases presented since 1991. They narrowed the focus of their study in two ways. First, they divided cases into two tabloid eras: the first began with the trial of William Kennedy Smith in 1991 and ended September 10, 2001, and the second era focused on the 9/11 attacks until roughly the publication of their book. Their rationale for dividing the coverage is that they saw some fundamental changes in the intensity of coverage provided about cases following the September 11 attacks. Second, they focused their presentation on ten cases that received the “highest volume of media attention.” The book thus focuses on the following cases: the rape trial of William Kennedy Smith, the police beating of Rodney King, the murder trials of Lyle and Erik Menendez, Louise Woodward, OJ Simpson, and Scott Peterson, the murder of Jon Benet Ramsey, the child molestation trials of Michael Jackson, the insider trading trial of Martha Stewart, and the legal battles related to ending the life of Terry Schiavo.

The book is valuable because it provides good insights into the impact of media coverage of these cases in tabloid style. It is fundamental to their argument that the usefulness of the available news product has decreased significantly because of the emphasis on the shallow characteristics of these cases. Specifically, they discuss that news organizations are significantly more likely to emphasize the entertainment aspects of a story at the expense of information, analysis, and legal critique. The critical conclusion of their work is that the consuming public is more than just reading these stories for their entertainment value, but such coverage impacts public perceptions about the legal and criminal justice system.

Although I do not necessarily think that my criticisms impact their findings and conclusions, I did want to note a couple of issues. First, I think it would have been important to quantify the coverage within the cases selected. It seems to me that it would be valuable to select a random sample of articles about each case, and then code the informa-